

5 Powerful Exercises To Increase Your Mental Strength

The following guest post is by Amy Morin, a licensed clinical social worker in Lincoln, Maine. In addition to working as a psychotherapist, she is also an adjunct college psychology instructor and she serves as About.com's Parenting Teens expert.

Amy Morin

Psychology often discusses mental health — but what's not often discussed is a clear definition of mental strength. To me, mental strength means that you regulate your emotions, manage your thoughts, and behave in a positive manner, despite your circumstances. Developing mental strength is about finding the courage to live according to your values and being bold enough to create your own definition of success.

Mental strength involves more than just willpower; it requires hard work and commitment. It's about establishing healthy habits and choosing to devote your time and energy to self-improvement. (Check out [Cheryl Snapp Connor's post, based on my list of the 13 things mentally strong people avoid.](#))

Although it's easier to feel mentally strong when life seems simple — often, true mental strength becomes most apparent in the midst of tragedy. Choosing to develop skills that increase your mental strength is the best way to prepare for life's inevitable obstacles.

Many exercises exist that can help you develop mental strength. But here are five that can get you started:

1. Evaluate Your Core Beliefs

We've all developed core beliefs about ourselves, our lives and the world in general. Core beliefs develop over time and largely depend upon our past experiences. Whether you're aware of your core beliefs or not, they influence your thoughts, your behavior and emotions.

Sometimes, core beliefs are inaccurate and unproductive. For example, if you believe that you'll never succeed in life, you may be less apt to apply for new jobs — and inadvertently, you may not present yourself well on job interviews. Therefore, your core beliefs may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Identify and evaluate your core beliefs. Look for beliefs that are black and white, and then find exceptions to the rule. Very few things in life are “always” or “never” true. Modifying core beliefs requires purposeful intention and hard work, but it can change the entire course of your life.

2. Expend Your Mental Energy Wisely

Wasting brain power ruminating about things you can't control drains mental energy quickly. The more you think about negative problems that you can't solve, the less energy you'll have leftover for creative endeavors. For example, sitting and worrying about the weather forecast isn't helpful. If a major storm is headed your way, worrying about it won't prevent it. You can, however, choose to prepare for it. Focus on what is only within your control.

Save your mental energy for productive tasks, such as solving problems or setting goals. When your thoughts aren't productive, make a conscious effort to shift your mental energy to more helpful topics. The more you practice expending your mental energy wisely, the more it will become a habit.

3. Replace Negative Thoughts with Productive Thoughts

Although most of us don't spend time thinking about our thoughts, increasing your awareness of your thinking habits proves useful in building resilience. Exaggerated, negative thoughts, such as, “I can't ever do anything right,” hold you back from reaching your full potential. Catch your negative thoughts before they spiral out of control and influence your behavior.

Identify and replace overly negative thoughts with thoughts that are more productive. Productive thoughts don't need to be extremely positive, but should be realistic. A more balanced thought may be, “I have some weaknesses, but I also have plenty of strengths.” Changing your thoughts requires constant monitoring, but the process can be instrumental in helping you become your best self.

4. Practice Tolerating Discomfort

Being mentally strong doesn't mean you don't experience emotions. In fact, mental strength requires you to become acutely aware of your emotions so you can make the best choice about how to respond.

Mental strength is about accepting your feelings without being controlled by them.

Mental strength also involves an understanding of when it makes sense to behave contrary to your emotions. For example, if you experience anxiety that prevents you from trying new things or accepting new opportunities, try stepping out of your comfort zone if you want to continue to challenge yourself.

Tolerating uncomfortable emotions takes practice, but it becomes easier as your confidence grows.

Practice behaving like the person you'd like to become. Instead of saying, "I wish I could be more outgoing," choose to behave in a more outgoing manner, whether you feel like it or not. Some discomfort is often necessary for greater gain, and tolerating that discomfort will help make your vision a reality, one small step at a time.

5. Reflect on Your Progress Daily

Today's busy world doesn't lend itself to making much time available for quiet reflection. Create time to reflect upon your progress toward developing mental strength. At the end of each day, ask yourself what you've learned about your thoughts, emotions and behavior. Consider what you hope to improve upon or accomplish tomorrow.

Developing mental strength is a work in progress. There is always room for improvement, and at times this will seem more difficult than at other times. Reflecting upon your progress can reinforce your ability to reach your definition of success while living according to your values.